Morals, Motivation and Convention

HUME'S INFLUENTIAL DOCTRINES

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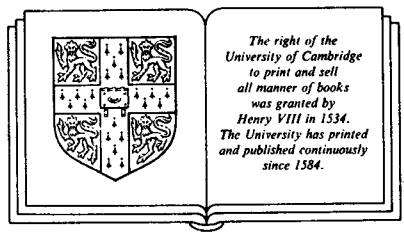

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Introduction

Certain doctrines are to be found in an important and influential text: David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature,* Book III, especially Parts i and ii (along with the supporting passage in II, iii, 3 and some passages from his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*).[1] These provide the *loci classici* of a number of apparently interrelated theses and arguments in moral philosophy, philosophical psychology, social and political philosophy which have become a part of the intellectual baggage of no small number of contemporary philosophers. With only a bit of exaggeration I will call such philosophers and such doctrines 'Humean'. Such philosophers need not be Humean in other respects, e.g. in epistemology or general philosophy of mind. Nor do all explicitly recognise their Humean tendencies even in the areas in question.

This is not so much an essay on Hume as on Humeans. It is about certain doctrines and arguments from Book III which are still of contemporary influence and importance. This essay enters into a dialogue with these Humean traditions. In some cases contemporary Humeans have re-shaped and re-argued the basic Humean positions so extensively that their positions are clearly not Hume's even if Humean. They are in the spirit of Hume. Many might be regarded as continuing or perfecting the basic Humean ideas or altering them in ways more satisfactory but somehow still in the spirit of the basic enterprise. Thus in some cases it will be more appropriate to discuss these contemporary refinements (e.g. the

1 *A Treatise of Human Nature,* first published in 1739 and 1740. Unprefixed page numbers in the text and notes are to the Oxford University Press edition edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P.H. Nidditch. *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals,* published in 1751 [hereafter *Enquiry*], is generally regarded as intended as a more popular work thus omitting much of philosophical interest. Page references are to the Oxford University Press edition of Hume's *Enquiries* edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and revised by P.H. Nidditch.

work of contemporary philosophers such as D. Davidson, B. Williams, or D. Lewis) rather than the original, insufficient or outdated argument of Hume's Book III. And precisely because this essay is in the end addressed to contemporary Humeans it is not my purpose to take up everything discussed in Book III. Certain of Hume's doctrines and arguments are not of much interest or influence today. And rightly so. Contemporary Humeans are the first to disown them. Rather, I will concentrate on those strands of Hume's discussion which, in one form or another, continue to influence and be of interest. And what are they?

In Part i of Book III Hume presents, and argues for, what to philosophers today seems a meta-ethical view. Hume's Section 1 of Part i raises the question whether 'moral distinctions' are 'derived from reason'. Hume responds with a firm 'No' and provides various arguments thereto. By far his most influential argument relies on certain theses in philosophical psychology (and action theory) for which the groundwork was laid in II, iii, 3: Reason alone can never have an influence on the actions or passions; There is no combat between 'reason' and 'passion'; No action or passion is 'contrary to reason' or 'unreasonable'; 'Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions'. Whatever exactly these claims mean they are Humean to the core. While Section 1 of Part i makes a negative claim (it tells us what morality is *not*), Section 2 defends the complementary positive thesis (it tells us then what *is* the nature of making moral distinctions). In some way it is a matter of feeling or 'sentiment' or 'agreeable feeling'. To contemporary philosophers this readily suggests a meta-ethics with a large dose of subjectivism. Following Mackie (1980) we call Hume's meta-ethics, whatever it is exactly, Hume's 'sentimentalism'.

By contrast to the apparent meta-ethics in Part i, Parts ii and iii seem to develop a moral theory or at least a theory of morality (as a psychological and social phenomenon). Still, to some extent the discussion here harks back to and directly develops the 'sentimentalism' of Part i. Unlike some twentieth century meta-ethicists Hume is not content to speak vaguely of 'sentiments', 'pro-attitudes' or 'emotings'. Hume clearly sees that the sentiments of which he speaks in his account of the making of moral distinctions are not just any and every sentiment, passion, feeling or attitude but are sentiments of some special sort (472). Then, roughly speaking, Hume gives a reductive account of the peculiarly moral sen-

timent in terms of self-interest, 'sympathy' and other more basic notions of his philosophy psychology. The moral sentiment is of a peculiar kind but it is not *sui generis*. It can be explained in terms of prior psychological mechanisms.

However a couple of features of Hume's moral theory in Parts ii and iii are less easy to explain in connection to the meta-ethical theses in Part i which have been so influential. Also they have not been taken over by contemporary 'Humeans'. First, Hume seems to presuppose a rather extreme version of virtue morality. Hume thinks moral evaluation of *motives* (and virtue talk) is logically basic and prior to moral evaluation of *acts* (what others would regard as obligation or right action talk). Hume's examples all centre on praise and blame, responsibility and innocence, merit and demerit. This is clearly so even when Hume is speaking of 'virtuous' *acts*. This is in contrast to many moral theories (such as utilitarianism or the deontological theory of W.D. Ross) which begin with questions about what features of acts are good reasons for choosing those acts. Only secondarily do they go on to the important class of judgments we make when making assessments of virtue and vice, blame and innocence, etc. However for Hume, our moral 'distinctions' are not only virtue-oriented, but indeed virtue-*based*. In this regard Hume's moral theory is somewhat distinctive and contentious in a way he hardly recognised.

A second distinctive feature of Hume's moral theory is the fundamental distinction he makes between two classes of virtues: natural (Part iii) and artificial, such as justice (Part ii). Hume's assumption that moral judgments are morally virtue-based assessments applies plausibly in the cases of virtues he classes as 'natural virtues' for there is always a natural, independently specifiable *motive* which Hume can use to specify the corresponding virtue. However the obligations of justice seem, at first glance, the most obvious counter-example to view that our ordinary moral sentiments are virtue-based. These seem to be obligation-based. Hence one reason for Hume's comparatively elaborate treatment of justice in Part ii. He has special problems with justice.

The two above features of Hume's moral theory are somewhat idiosyncratic and not really influential. By contrast, Hume's account of the artificial virtue of justice in Part ii has been particularly influential in recent moral and political philosophy. Most influential is his naturalistic starting point, 'the circumstances of human na-

ture'. Hume's account of the human condition is taken up by philosophers such as H.L.A. Hart (1961), John Rawls (1971), J.L. Mackie (1977, ch. 5) and many others. Of further contemporary interest is Hume's seemingly no-nonsense, naturalistic account of justice (and systems of conventions in general). Hume requires no mysterious, autonomous, non-natural properties. No super-empirical faculty of intuition. No queer entities. Nor again is his account merely the result of a don's armchair investigations into ordinary language or ordinary concepts. Hume thinks that the notion of justice and the obligations of justice, the notion we have, is to be accounted for naturalistically in terms of, among other things, the operation of social conventions. Finally, he gives a (tantalisingly fleeting) naturalistic account of convention.

Contemporary philosophy can find Hume's attempted account of convention of interest in itself quite apart from the use to which Hume puts it within his larger account of our ideas of justice. A general theory of convention promises to be of interest, perhaps even crucial, in a number of areas outside moral philosophy, e.g. philosophy of the social sciences, philosophy of language. For example it seems important in any real explanation of how 'institutional facts' differ from 'brute facts'. If not moralists, then at least social scientists and anthropologists may well require the notion of social norms or social rules to describe societies and institutions (and not only to describe the particular institutions of property, contract and law upon which Hume concentrates). Naturalistic accounts often come to a dead stop when confronted with the social. Hume provides a naturalistic account of such social facts in terms of his notion of a convention. If that in turn can be given a plausible naturalistic account, the job is done. Here Hume's approach, if not his exact attempt, continues to be of interest.

Contemporary philosophy owes much to Book III of Hume's *Treatise*. From it come many 'Humean' doctrines of great contemporary interest. However, the individual philosophers I call 'Humean' really tend to pick and choose from the doctrines. It is more accurate to say they tend to be Humeans in one respect (meta-ethics, philosophical psychology, theory of justice, theory of convention) but not always in others. For example Rawls and others develop Hume's account of the circumstances of justice in Part ii without any commitment to Hume's sentimentalism in Part i. Conversely, those philosophers who concentrate on what Hume says

about 'is' and 'ought' in Part i are generally uninterested (even embarrassed) about what Hume says on the virtues or justice. Contemporary Humeans may preserve something like individual Humean doctrines from Book III, but they do not take over the continuity. They take parts of the structure, like re-usable parts from a wrecked automobile, but not the structure, not even a stripped down structure. It is worth asking whether there is a *continuity* in Hume's discussion which is of contemporary interest. Is there more re-usable here than just a lot of individual parts? I will argue that there is.

While I am mainly concerned with the elaboration of Humean doctrines in a way that is of contemporary interest, I am also concerned to be accurate in the understanding and interpretation of Hume. I do claim that these doctrines and issues are in Hume, although mixed in with, and confused with, much else of less interest. In any case my interpretation of Hume is not idiosyncratic but broadly sympathetic with the clear exposition by J.L. Mackie in *Hume's Moral Theory* (1980), the detailed work of Jonathan Harrison in *Hume's Moral Epistemology* (1976) and *Hume's Theory of Justice* (1981), and David Miller's careful handling of Hume's theory in historical context in *Hume's Political Thought* (1981).

For those solely interested in Hume studies and the interpretation of Hume I do, however, have some things to offer. I will be concerned with the question of how Part i relates to Parts ii and iii in Book III, with the question of how deeply embedded Hume's political conservativism is in his philosophical argument, and, finally, with exactly why Hume thinks he has such a special problem about the virtue of justice and the 'regard to justice'. However in another respect mere students of history may be somewhat disconcerted. I attribute to Hume several long-running, systematic ambiguities throughout Book III, certain conceptual confusions which fall in together with such unexpected precision that the effect is one of door-slamming farce. A comedy of philosophical errors. Thus the student of history who merely wants to re-create the intellectual feel, the texture of the past will find my discussion somewhat destroys the ability to do so. To think exactly like Hume did requires being subject to many of the same conceptual illusions. Insofar as this essay exposes these ambiguities and illusions, it renders the reader less able to look at things as Hume did. We may, in a certain respect, understand Hume less. While we may have an un-

derstanding of *how* different theses could be confused, we will find it much more difficult to work up the state of mind which *sees* them as one. I make no apologies for this result.

My main concern, then, in discussing Book III is critical and contemporary rather than exegetical. But I should admit to another motivation as well. The examination of some of the Humean arguments is of a certain clinical interest. Book III and the more contemporary elaborations of such doctrines provide rather nice case studies of some of the pathologies of philosophical argumentation. The study of conceptual confusions in influential thought is a worthwhile study in itself. I doubt whether the usual introductory courses in formal or informal logic (or any list of 'informal fallacies') really prepare one for the pitfalls of philosophy. For one thing, many of the more seductive confusions are more or less once-off, not easily categorised under some general heading. For another, great confusions often involve systematic intertwinings of different confusions (no one of which would be very deceiving). I suspect the best way to gain expertise in avoiding conceptual confusions is by examining particular, commonly seductive instances of conceptual confusion, i.e., by case studies. One of the classic case studies of conceptual confusion in the history of philosophy is the Butler-Broad refutation of armchair psychological egoism. There are several parallels here with the present study. Many Humeans in meta-ethics and philosophical psychology tend to be smug in much the same way armchair psychological egoists tend to be. Just as these latter can never be quite so smug once subjected to Butler's attack, so likewise it is the purpose of this book to make it difficult for Humeans to be too smug.

However the use of the influential Humean doctrines as case studies is only a part of the purpose of this study. The main aim is a bit more constructive. One naturally wonders, having swept aside the vulgar confusions, self-incapsulating dogmas, and conceptual illusions, whether something can be made of the basic Humean claims and approach. This essay tries to point the directions in which the various Humean projects might go to avoid the main pitfalls.

Because this book is mainly addressed to Humeans, it will say little to those (very few) who cannot feel even a bit of the seductive pull of Hume's views (especially his meta-ethics) in the first place. It is criticism from within, not from without. Here a confession is

in order. I admit to being a Humean myself, once a smug Humean. Thus the 'vulgar fallacies' and 'conceptual confusions' discussed are usually the views I held five minutes ago – in intellectual time. I am a loyal Humean with the doubtful habit of raising questions like 'Just what is our argument for that?' and 'What would we say against someone who didn't already concede that . . . ?' So it is quite natural to begin the investigation with Hume himself, who hardly shirked these questions. This essay is the work of a self-critical Humean.

Unless it's the work of a 'mole'.